

17

Odysseus Goes to the Town

Book Seventeen

The beggar comes home. Leaning on Eumaeus' arm, kicked by a treacherous goatherd on the road, Odysseus walks unknown into his own palace – and only his old dog Argus, dying on a dung-heap, knows him. Inside he begs at his own tables and is answered with a hurled footstool, while even wicked men wonder aloud whether the ragged stranger might be a god. And upstairs a patient wife waits to ask him for news of the husband standing before her.

NAME

SET

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BOOK SEVENTEEN

Odysseus Goes to the Town

The palace at last. The disguised Odysseus walks into his own hall as a beggar, is recognised by his dying dog and abused by the suitors, while Penelope longs to question the stranger.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Telemachus returns to the palace; the seer Theoclymenus assures Penelope that Odysseus is already home.
- Eumaeus leads the beggar to town; the goatherd Melanthius insults and kicks him on the way.
- At the gate the old dog Argus knows his master after twenty years, and dies.
- Odysseus begs among the suitors; Antinous abuses him and hurls a footstool, shocking even the others.
- Penelope sends for the stranger; he asks to speak with her at nightfall, away from the suitors.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

enduring insult and injury to keep his cover

Argus

the faithful dog who knows him and dies

Melanthius

the disloyal goatherd, foil to Eumaeus

Antinous

the cruellest of the suitors

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 17 brings Odysseus into his own hall and turns the poem's spotlight on *xenia* and its abuse. Note the sorting of loyal and faithless servants (Eumaeus and Melanthius), the pathos of Argus, and the great violation as Antinous strikes a beggar – with the warning that a stranger may be a god in disguise. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

Odysseus Goes To The Town

— TO THE TOWN

As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, noble Odysseus' dear son Telemachus was eager to set out for the city. He bound his elegant sandals on his feet, picked up his strong spear that so well fitted his grasp, and as he set out for the city, said to his swineherd,

5 'Old friend, I am going to the town now to show myself to my mother; I am sure she won't stop her dismal weeping and lamenting till she sees me in the flesh. So here are my instructions for you. Take our unfortunate visitor to the city and let him beg there for his meals. Anyone who wants to will give him a crust and a cup of water.
10 I myself cannot possibly look after all and sundry: I have too many troubles on my mind. And if he is annoyed by this, so much the worse for him. I believe in plain speaking.'

'Friend,' the quick-witted Odysseus here put in, 'I myself have no wish to be left behind. A town is a better place than the country for a
15 man to beg for food; people who want to will give to me. I am unsuited by my age to live on a farm at a master's beck and call. So go on your way; and presently this man will bring me along as you have told him to, when I have warmed myself at the fire and the sun gets hot. For these clothes of mine are terribly thin and I am afraid the
20 morning frost might be too much for me. It's a long walk to the town, as you have told me.'

Telemachus now went off through the farm with rapid strides, planning vengeance on the Suitors. When he reached the stately palace he leant his spear against one of the tall pillars, then crossed
25 the stone threshold and went in.

— PENELOPE AND TELEMACHUS

The first to see him was [the nurse Eurycleia](#), who was busy spreading rugs over the ornate chairs. With tears in her eyes she ran up to meet him, and soon all the maids of the brave Odysseus were pressing round him and showering affectionate kisses on his head
30 and shoulders. And now the wise Penelope came out from her room, looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite, and dissolved in tears as she threw her arms round her son's neck and kissed his forehead and his fine eyes. 'You're back, Telemachus, light of my eyes!' she said between her sobs. 'And I thought I would never see you again after
35 you had sailed for Pylos to find out about your dear father – so secretly, so much against my wishes. Come, tell me whether you saw him.'

'Mother,' the thoughtful Telemachus replied, 'do not bring me to tears

LINE 26

[the nurse Eurycleia](#) **Eurycleia** is the aged nurse who suckled Odysseus as a baby and now runs the household. Utterly loyal, she is the one who will recognise him by his old scar in Book 19.

or stir my emotions when I have just escaped from a violent death.

- 40 But go upstairs to your room with your ladies, and when you have washed and changed into fresh clothes pray to all the gods, promising them the most perfect offerings if Zeus ever grants us a day of reckoning. I myself will go to the assembly-place to fetch a guest who accompanied me on my journey back. I sent him ahead of
- 45 me to the town with my good crew and told Peiraeus to take him home and treat him with all care and respect till I came.'

To this Penelope made no reply, but went and bathed, changed into fresh clothes, and then vowed to make a perfect offering to all the gods if ever Zeus should grant her house a day of reckoning.

- 50 Telemachus strode across the hall and went out, carrying his spear, with two hunting hounds at his heels. Athene endowed him with such supernatural grace that all eyes were turned on him in admiration as he approached. The highborn Suitors gathered round him in a throng, with kindly speeches on their lips and evil brewing
- 55 in their hearts. But he evaded them as they crowded round, and found a seat with Mentor, Antiphus and Halitherses, old friends of his father. As they were plying him with questions about his voyage, Peiraeus the famous spearman came up with his guest Theoclymenus, whom he had escorted through the streets to the
- 60 assembly-place.

Telemachus, far from ignoring his guest, immediately rose to meet him, but it was Peiraeus who spoke first: 'Telemachus, do send some women, straightaway, to my house to collect the gifts Menelaus gave you.'

- 65 'No, Peiraeus,' the cautious Telemachus said, 'none of us can tell what is going to happen. If my lords the Suitors assassinate me in the palace and divide up my estate, I should like you or one of my friends here to keep and enjoy the treasures. On the other hand, if I succeed in sending the Suitors to their doom, then bring the gifts to my
- 70 house and make us both happy.'

This settled, he led the way home for his travel-worn guest and brought him to the stately palace, where they threw down their cloaks on settles and chairs, stepped into the polished baths and bathed. When the maid-servants had finished bathing them and

75 rubbing them with oil, they gave them tunics and threw warm cloaks round their shoulders, and the two left the baths and sat down on chairs. A maid came with water in a fine golden jug and poured it out over a silver basin for them to rinse their hands. She drew up a polished table and the faithful housekeeper brought some bread and

80 set it by them, together with a choice of delicacies, helping them liberally to all she could offer.

Telemachus' mother sat opposite them by a pillar of the hall, reclining in an easy-chair and spinning the delicate thread on her distaff, while they helped themselves to the good food laid before them.

85 When they had all satisfied their hunger and thirst the wise Penelope broke the silence, saying, 'Telemachus, I am going upstairs – I am going to lie down on my bed – my bed of sorrows watered by my tears ever since Odysseus went with the sons of Atreus to Ilium – you could not bring yourself to tell me before the proud Suitors come
90 back to the house, whether you have heard anything about your father's return.'

'Very well, mother,' said Telemachus, 'I will tell you the truth. We went to Pylos and there visited King Nestor, the shepherd of his people, who received me in his great palace and showed me every
95 hospitality. He might have been my father, no and I his long-lost son just back from my travels, so kindly did he and his royal sons look after me. But of the brave Odysseus, alive or dead, he said he had not heard a single word from anyone on earth. However, he lent me a sturdy chariot and pair to take me on to the famous warrior
100 Menelaus, Atreus' son. And there I saw Helen of Argos, for whose sake the Argives and the Trojans by a god's will suffered so much. Menelaus of the loud war-cry asked what had brought me to this pleasant land of Lacedaemon, and when I had explained the whole matter he cried:

105 ' "How disgraceful! So the cowards want to creep into the brave man's bed? It is **just as if a deer had put her two little unweaned fawns** to sleep in a mighty lion's den and gone to range the high ridges and the grassy dales for pasture. Back comes the lion to his lair, and the two fawns meet a grisly fate – as will these Suitors at
110 Odysseus' hands! Once, in the pleasant isle of Lesbos, I saw him stand up to Philomeleides in a wrestling-match and bring him down with a mighty throw which delighted all the Achaeans. By Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, that's the Odysseus I should like to see these Suitors meet! A swift death and a sorry wedding there would
115 be for all! But as to your appeal and the questions you asked me – I have no wish to deceive you or to put you off with evasive answers. On the contrary I shall pass on to you without concealment or reserve every word that I heard myself from the infallible lips of the Old Man of the Sea. He told me that he had seen your father in great
120 distress on an island, in the Nymph Calypso's palace, where she keeps him captive; for without ship or crew to carry him so far across the sea, it is impossible for him to reach his home." That is all I found out from Atreus' son, the famous warrior Menelaus. This accomplished I left him. The immortal gods sent me a favourable
125 wind and brought me quickly back to my beloved Ithaca.'

LINES 106–107

just as if a deer had put her two little

unweaned fawns A menacing **simile** from a remembered omen: the suitors are like fawns a deer has foolishly left to sleep in a lion's den – and the lion (Odysseus) is coming home.

— THEOCLYMENUS' PROPHECY

Penelope was deeply moved by what Telemachus told her. And now the godlike Theoclymenus joined in: 'Honourable lady, wife of Laertes' son Odysseus, Menelaus has no accurate information. But listen to me; I will give you **a clear and truthful prophecy**. I swear by Zeus before all other gods, and by the board of hospitality, and by the good Odysseus' hearth at which I stand, that Odysseus is actually in his own country at this moment, at rest or on the move, gathering information about these crimes, and scheming revenge on the Suitors – witness the omen which I saw as I sat on our good ship and revealed to Telemachus.'

'Sir,' said the prudent Penelope, 'may what you say prove true! If it does, you will soon receive from me such friendship and generosity that anyone who meets you will call you a fortunate man.'

While they were talking together inside Odysseus' palace, the Suitors, in their high and mighty way, were amusing themselves outside with throwing the discus and javelin in their usual place, the levelled terrace in front of Odysseus' palace. When supper-time arrived and the sheep returned from the fields round about in the charge of the usual drovers, Medon, who was their favourite herald and always attended their meals, came to summon them.

'Now that you young men have enjoyed your sports,' he said, 'come inside, so that we may get supper ready. There's much to be said for a meal at the right time.' The Suitors did as he requested, left their games and flocked into the stately palace, where they threw down their cloaks on the seats and chairs and prepared for a banquet by slaughtering some full-grown sheep and goats as well as several fattened hogs and a heifer from the herd.

Odysseus and the loyal swineherd were now preparing to come in from the country to the town. It was the master-herdsman who spoke first. 'Friend,' he said, 'I see you are still determined to go to the town today, as my master said you should. I myself would rather leave you here to look after the farm. But I respect and fear him. He might scold me later, and a rebuke from one's master can be very unpleasant. So now let us be on our way. The best part of the day is gone and you may well find it chilly towards evening.'

'Understood and agreed,' said Odysseus. 'A word to the wise! Let's make a start; and you must lead all the way. But do give me a staff to lean on, if you have one cut and ready; you say the path is very slippery.'

As he spoke he threw the strap of his poor, shabby knapsack over his shoulders, and Eumaeus gave him a staff to his liking. Then the pair

LINE 129

a clear and truthful prophecy The seer **Theoclymenus** swears a solemn prophecy to Penelope: Odysseus is already back on Ithaca, in hiding, learning the suitors' crimes and preparing their ruin.

set out, leaving the dogs and herdsmen behind to look after the farm. In this way Eumaeus brought his master to the city, hobbling along with his staff and looking like a wretched old beggar in the miserable
 170 clothes he was wearing.

They walked on down a rocky path till they were near the city and there came to a solidly built clear-flowing fountain where the people of the town drew their water. It had been **built by Ithacus, Neritus and Polyctor**. A group of black poplars, flourishing on the moisture,
 175 encircled the spot. The cool stream came tumbling down from the rock overhead, and above the fountain an altar had been erected to the Nymphs, where all travellers made their offerings. Here they came across Melanthius son of Dolius, who with two drovers to help him was driving down some goats for the Suitors' table, the pick of all
 180 his herds. This man no sooner set eyes on them than he burst into a torrent of vulgar abuse, which roused Odysseus to anger.

— MELANTHIUS THE GOATHERD

'Ha!' the fellow cried. '**One villain leading another** – a case of birds of a feather! Tell me, you miserable swineherd, where are you taking this dirty pig of yours, this nauseating beggar and plate-licker at the
 185 feast? Just the sort to stand scratching his back against the door-posts, begging for scraps, but never asking for swords and cauldrons. Give him to me, to look after the folds, to muck out the pens and carry fodder to the kids, and he might thrive on whey and put some muscles on his thighs. But the fellow has got into bad ways, and work
 190 on the farm is the last thing he's looking for. He'd much rather fill his gluttonous belly by grovelling and begging round the town. You mark my words, and time will prove me right. If he goes to noble Odysseus' palace, a shower of footstools shied at his head by the men there will break in pieces on his ribs.'

With that he passed by, and as he did so the fool **landed a kick on Odysseus'** hip, failing, however, to push him off the path, so firm was his stance. Odysseus debated whether to leap at the fellow and kill him with his staff or to lift him by his middle and smash his head on the ground. In the end he managed to control himself. It was the
 200 swineherd who looked Melanthius full in the face and rebuked him.

'Nymphs of the Fountain, Daughters of Zeus,' he cried, raising his hands in earnest prayer, 'if ever Odysseus made you a burnt-offering of the thighs of rams or kids wrapped up in their rich fat, grant me my wish that he himself may be brought back to us by some god. He'd
 205 soon cure you, Melanthius, of all the swaggering ways you have picked up since you took to loafing round the town while incompetent herdsmen ruin your flocks.'

'Well I'll be – ! What a lot of snarling from a vicious mongrel!' retorted

LINES 173–174

built by Ithacus, Neritus and Polyctor The town fountain was built by the legendary founders of Ithaca – Ithacus, Neritus and Polyctor – the ancestral heroes the island and its mountain (Neriton) are named after.

LINE 182

One villain leading another The man hurling abuse is **Melanthius**, the goatherd – a servant who has gone over to the suitors. He is the opposite of the loyal Eumaeus.

LINES 195–196

landed a kick on Odysseus Melanthius even kicks the beggar as he passes, and Odysseus swallows it without hitting back. His iron **self-control** – holding the disguise and biding his time – is a recurring theme of these books.

the goatherd Melanthius. ‘One of these days I’ll pack him off from
 210 Ithaca in a black ship and sell him for a fortune. As for Telemachus,
 may Apollo with his silver bow shoot him down in the palace this very
 day, or the Suitors crush him, as surely as Odysseus’ chance of
 returning home from abroad has gone for ever!’

With that he left them to pursue their way, while he himself went
 215 ahead and was soon at the King’s house, where he went straight in
 and joined the Suitors, taking a seat opposite Eurymachus, who had a
 liking for him. The servants helped him to the roast, and the trusty
 housekeeper brought him some bread.

Odysseus and the good swineherd now arrived. They paused outside
 220 and the notes from a polished lyre came to their ears. For Phemius
 was just tuning up for a song.

‘Eumaeus,’ said Odysseus, taking the swineherd by the arm, ‘this
 must surely be Odysseus’ palace: it would be easy to pick it out at a
 glance from any number of houses. There are buildings beyond
 225 buildings; the courtyard wall with its coping is a fine piece of work
 and those folding doors are true defences. No one could storm it. I
 gather too that a large company is there for dinner: one can smell the
 roast, and someone is playing the lyre. The gods made music and
 banquets to go together.’

‘All that must be obvious,’ said Eumaeus, ‘to someone as shrewd as
 230 you. But now let’s consider our next move. Either you go into the
 palace first and approach the Suitors while I stay where I am; or, if
 you prefer it, you wait here and let me be the first to go in. But in
 that case don’t be long, or they may see you here outside and throw
 235 something at you or drive you away. Do think about this.’

‘Right. Agreed,’ said the noble, long-suffering Odysseus. ‘A word to
 the wise! You shall go in first while I stay here; for I am quite used to
 blows and missiles. I have been toughened by what I have suffered on
 the waves and on the battlefield. After all that, a bit more makes no
 240 difference. But if there is anything that a man can’t conceal it is the
 craving of an accursed belly, the cause of so much trouble to men. It
 even prompts them to fit out great ships and sail the barren seas,
 bringing death and destruction to their enemies.’

— THE DOG ARGUS

As they stood talking, **a dog lying there lifted his head** and pricked
 245 up his ears. Argus was his name. Patient Odysseus himself had
 owned and bred him, though he had sailed for holy Ilium before he
 could reap the benefit. In years gone by the young huntsmen had
 often taken him out after wild goats, deer and hares. But now, in his
 owner’s absence, he lay abandoned on the heaps of dung from the

LINE 244

a dog lying there lifted his head The famous scene of **Argus**, Odysseus’ old hunting dog. Neglected and flea-ridden on a dung-heap, he alone knows his master at once after twenty years – wags his tail, and dies.

250 mules and cattle which lay in profusion at the gate, awaiting removal by Odysseus' servants as manure for his great estate. There, full of vermin, lay Argus the hound. But directly he became aware of Odysseus' presence, he wagged his tail and dropped his ears, though he lacked the strength now to come nearer to his master. Odysseus
255 turned his eyes away, and, making sure Eumaeus did not notice, brushed away a tear, and said:

'Eumaeus, it is extraordinary to see a hound like this lying in the dung. He's a beauty, though I cannot really tell whether his looks were matched by his speed or whether he was just one of those dogs
260 whom their masters feed at table and keep for show.'

Then you, Eumaeus the swineherd, said in reply: 'This dog did have a master, but it's all too plain that he died abroad. If he was now what he was in the heyday of his looks and form, as Odysseus left him when he sailed for Troy, you'd be astonished at his speed and power.
265 No game that he gave chase to could escape him in the deepest depth of the forest. He was a marvel too at picking up the scent. But now he's in a bad way; his master has died far away from home and the women are too thoughtless to look after him. Servants, when their masters are no longer there to order them about, have little will
270 to do their duties as they should. All-seeing Zeus takes half the good out of a man on the day he becomes a slave.'

With this Eumaeus left him, and, entering the stately palace, passed straight into the hall where the haughty Suitors were assembled. As for Argus, the black hand of Death descended on him the moment he
275 caught sight of Odysseus – after twenty years.

The godlike Telemachus was the first to observe the swineherd coming through the palace, and beckoned to him at once to join him. Eumaeus looked about him and picked up a stool which stood there for the carver to sit on when carving meat for the Suitors at their
280 banquets in the hall. This he brought and placed at Telemachus' table, opposite him, and sat down. A steward fetched a portion of meat, which he set before him, and helped him to bread from a basket.

— THE BEGGAR ENTERS

Close on his heels Odysseus entered the buildings. He looked like some wretched old beggar leaning on a stick, his body covered with
285 filthy rags. He sat down on the ash-wood threshold just inside the door, with his back against a pillar of cypress smoothed by some carpenter long ago and expertly trued to the line. Telemachus beckoned the swineherd to his side, and, selecting a whole loaf from the beautiful bowl of bread and as much meat as his cupped hands
290 would hold, he said:

LINE 261

Then you, Eumaeus the swineherd, said in reply Homer's fond direct address to Eumaeus once more – 'then you, Eumaeus...'

‘Take this food and give it to the stranger. And tell him to go the rounds himself and beg from each of the Suitors in turn. For diffidence doesn’t suit a person in need.’ As instructed, the swineherd went up to Odysseus and spoke these winged words:

295 ‘Stranger, Telemachus gives you this and tells you to go the rounds and beg from each of the Suitors in turn. He says that diffidence doesn’t suit a beggar.’

Resourceful Odysseus responded with these words: ‘I pray to you, Lord Zeus, to make Telemachus a happy man and grant him all the
300 wishes of his heart.’ He then stretched out both hands to take the food, put it down in front of his feet on his shabby bag, and ate his meal while the minstrel sang in the hall. He had finished his supper just as the divine bard was coming to an end, and then the company began to fill the hall with uproar. Athene now appeared before
305 Odysseus, Laertes’ son, and urged him to go round collecting scraps from the Suitors and so learn to distinguish the good from the bad, though this did not mean that in the end she was to save a single one from destruction.

— BEGGING THE SUITORS

So Odysseus set off and **began to beg from them one after the other**,
310 working from left to right and stretching out his hand to each like a man who has been a beggar all his life. They gave him food out of pity, and, surprised at his appearance, asked each other who he was and where he had come from. At this point the goatherd Melanthius called out: ‘Suitors of our noble Queen, listen to what I can tell you
315 about this stranger. I’ve seen him before. It was when the swineherd was bringing him down here. But I really don’t know who he is and where he comes from.’

At once Antinous rounded on Eumaeus. ‘How typical of our distinguished swineherd!’ he cried. ‘Why did you bring this fellow to
320 town? Haven’t we vagabonds enough already, loathsome beggars, plate-lickers at our feasts? Are you so dissatisfied with the numbers collected here to eat your master’s food that you must ask this fellow as well?’

Then you, Eumaeus the swineherd, replied: ‘Antinous, you may be
325 nobly born but there’s nothing noble in your speech. Who would of his own accord approach and invite a wandering stranger in unless he were a craftsman who worked for the whole community, a prophet, a physician, a carpenter, or even a divine minstrel who can give pleasure with his songs? For all the world over such guests as
330 those are welcomed, whereas nobody would call a beggar in to eat up his food. But of all the Suitors you are always the hardest on Odysseus’ servants, and especially on me. However, I care little for

LINE 309

began to beg from them one after the other In Greek custom a beggar would work round the table, asking each guest in turn; here Odysseus does the same to the suitors.

that as long as thoughtful Penelope and the godlike Telemachus are alive in the palace.'

335 'Enough now!' prudent Telemachus interposed. 'Don't bandy words with Antinous. It's always his way to rouse a man's passion with his evil tongue and egg the others on as well.' Then he rounded on Antinous with words that flew. 'Antinous, I appreciate your fatherly concern on my behalf when you tell me to order the stranger harshly
340 out of the house. God forbid such a thing! Give him something yourself. I don't grudge it you; indeed I wish you would. Have no fear, either, of offending my mother or any of my noble father's servants by your charity. But there's no such idea in your head. You'd far sooner eat the food yourself than give it away!'

345 'What a speech, Telemachus!' retorted Antinous, 'and what a temper! If all the Suitors were to treat him as I shall, the house would not see him for three months.' As he spoke, he seized the stool that supported his smooth feet during meals, and brought it into view from under the table where it lay. All the rest gave something and
350 filled the bag with bread and meat. It looked as if Odysseus might now regain his seat on the threshold without having to pay for his experiment with the Suitors. But he paused beside Antinous and addressed him directly.

'Give me something, my friend,' he said. 'You don't seem the meanest
355 of these lords but the noblest here, since you look every inch a king. Good reason why you should give me a better portion than the rest – and I'd sing your praises the wide world over. Time was when I too was one of the lucky ones with a rich house to live in, and I have often given to such a vagrant as myself, no matter who he was or
360 what his needs were. I had hundreds of servants and plenty of all that one needs to live in luxury and to be known as a rich man.

'But Zeus, son of Cronos – it must have been his will – wrecked my life [when he sent me to Egypt with roving pirates](#), a long journey, to destroy me. I anchored my curved ships in the Nile. There I ordered
365 my good men to stay by the ships on guard, while I sent out some scouts to reconnoitre from the heights. But these ran amuck and, carried away by their own violence, began to plunder some of the fine Egyptian farms, carrying off the women and children and killing the men. The hue and cry soon reached the city, and the townsfolk,
370 roused by the alarm, poured out at dawn. The whole plain was filled with infantry and chariots and the glint of arms. Zeus the Thunderer struck abject panic into my party. Not a man had the spirit to stand and face the enemy, for we were threatened on all sides. They ended by cutting down a large part of my force and carrying off the
375 survivors to work for them as slaves. As for me, they handed me over to a friend they met to take me to Cyprus, a man called Dmetor son

LINE 363

[when he sent me to Egypt with roving pirates](#)

Another of the beggar's invented tales – a raid on **Egypt** gone wrong, then slavery and Cyprus. As always, Odysseus folds just enough truth into the lie to make it ring true.

of Iasus, who rules the island by force. And it's from Cyprus that I came here in great distress, as you see.'

380 'What god,' exclaimed Antinous, 'has inflicted this plague on us to spoil our dinner? Stand out there in the middle and keep clear of my table, or you'll end up in the sort of Egypt and Cyprus you won't relish! The audacity and impudence of the beggar! He has only to pester each man in turn, and they give him food without a thought. They all have plenty before them, and nobody shows restraint or
385 consideration when it comes to being generous with other people's possessions.'

Quick-witted Odysseus drew back and said: 'Well, well! So you haven't the brains to match your looks! You wouldn't give so much as a pinch of salt from your household store to a servant of your own,
390 you who sit here at another man's table and can't bring yourself to take a bit of his bread and give it to me, though there's plenty there.'

— ANTINOUS' FOOTSTOOL

This enraged Antinous still more. He gave him a black look and his words flew: 'I fancy you won't leave this hall in one piece after such an insolent speech.' And picking up a stool he threw it and struck
395 Odysseus on the back under the right shoulder. But Odysseus stood firm **as a rock and did not reel at the blow**. He just shook his head in silence, filled with thoughts of revenge. Then he went back to the threshold, where he sat down, dropped his bulging bag, and addressed the Suitors:

400 'Listen to me, you lords who are courting the illustrious Queen, while I say what I feel. A knock or two, when a man is fighting for his own property, his oxen or white sheep, is nothing to cry about or resent. But this blow from Antinous was all because of my wretched belly, that cursed thing that is responsible for so many troubles of
405 mankind. If there are any gods and avenging furies for beggars, I hope Antinous will be dead before his wedding day.'

'Sit quietly and eat, stranger,' Antinous, Eupheithes' son retorted, 'or take yourself somewhere else. Otherwise talk like that will end in our young men dragging you through the house by the leg or arm and
410 tearing your skin to ribbons.'

— THE SUITORS SHOCKED

But the rest of them were deeply shocked, and one arrogant youth would say to another: 'Antinous, you did wrong to strike the wretched vagrant. You're a doomed man if he turns out to be some god from heaven. And **the gods do disguise themselves as strangers**
415 from abroad, and move from town to town in every shape, observing the deeds of the just and the unjust.'

LINE 396

as a rock and did not reel at the blow

Antinous hurls a footstool and hits the begging Odysseus on the shoulder. Odysseus takes it 'firm as a rock' (a **simile**). Striking a beggar and suppliant is a gross offence against the gods, and even the other suitors are appalled.

LINE 414

the gods do disguise themselves as strangers

The suitors' own unease points to a central belief: the gods are thought to walk the earth **disguised as strangers**, testing how men treat the poor and the guest. To abuse a beggar might be to abuse a god.

That was the talk among the Suitors, but Antinous took no notice of what they said, and Telemachus, though the blow made him bitterly sorry for his father, let no tear from his eyes fall to the ground, but
 420 shook his head in silence, filled with thoughts of revenge. But when the wise Queen Penelope heard of the assault on the stranger in her palace she cried out with her maids around her: 'I hope the Archer Apollo strikes you as you struck him!' And the housekeeper Eurynome chimed in: 'Ah, if we could only have our wishes, there's
 425 not a man among them who'd see Dawn on her beautiful throne tomorrow.'

— PENELOPE'S ANGER

'Nurse dear,' the thoughtful Penelope went on, 'I hate the whole gang for the wicked plots they hatch, but Antinous especially is **like a black spirit of destruction**. An unfortunate stranger, driven by
 430 poverty, came wandering through the house begging. All the rest were generous and filled his bag; but Antinous threw a stool at his back and hit him on the right shoulder.'

While Penelope was speaking to her maids as she sat in her apartment, the noble Odysseus was eating his supper. Penelope now
 435 summoned her trusty swineherd and said:

— PENELOPE SENDS FOR HIM

'Go, my good Eumaeus, and **ask the stranger to come here**. I should like to welcome him and ask whether he has heard anything about my valiant husband or seen him with his own eyes. He has the look of a man who has travelled far.'

440 Then you, Eumaeus the swineherd, said in reply: 'My Queen, I only wish the young lords would be quiet. With the tales he can tell, the man would hold you spellbound. Three nights I had him, three days I kept him in my hut, for I was the first man he came across on escaping from his ship; but even so he couldn't finish the story of his
 445 misfortunes. Sitting in my home he held me spellbound. It was like fixing one's eyes on a minstrel who has been taught by the gods to sing words that bring delight to mortals, and everyone longs to hear him when he sings.'

'He says he is an old family friend of Odysseus and lives in Crete, the
 450 home of the descendants of King Minos. Starting from there, like a rolling stone, and after many painful adventures, he has now arrived here; and he is positive that he has heard of Odysseus, that he's near at hand and alive, in the rich Thesprotian country, and bringing home a fortune.'

455 'Go now and call him,' said the thoughtful Penelope, 'so that he can tell me his story himself; and let these others sit outside or in the hall

LINES 428–429

like a black spirit of destruction Penelope, hearing of the outrage, curses Antinous – 'like a black spirit of destruction' (a **simile**) – and prays Apollo may strike him down.

LINE 436

ask the stranger to come here Penelope asks to question the stranger for news of her husband. This sets up their long, charged conversation in Book 19.

below and enjoy themselves, as they're in a cheerful mood. Their own wealth, their bread and mellow wine, lies untouched at home with no one but their servants to consume it, while they spend their whole
 460 time in and out of our house. They slaughter our oxen, our sheep and our fatted goats; they feast themselves and drink our sparkling wine, without a second thought. The truth is, much of our wealth is being squandered. There is nobody like Odysseus in charge to purge the house of this blight. Ah, if Odysseus could only come back to his own
 465 country! He and his son would soon pay them out for their crimes.'

— THE LUCKY SNEEZE

As she finished, **Telemachus gave a loud sneeze**, and the startling noise echoed round the house. Penelope laughed, turned to Eumaeus and said in words that flew: 'Go and bring this stranger here to me. Didn't you notice that my son sneezed a blessing on all I had said?
 470 May this mean that death is inevitable for all the Suitors! Not a man can escape his doom. One more point, and don't forget it. If, when I hear him tell his own story, I consider he is telling nothing but the truth, I will give him a fine new cloak and tunic.'

With these instructions the swineherd left her, and approaching the
 475 stranger spoke these winged words. 'My friend,' he said, 'the wise Penelope, Telemachus' mother, summons you. Sorrow-stricken as she is, she is moved to ask you some questions about her husband. If she considers you are telling nothing but the truth, she will give you a cloak and tunic, which you need more than anything else: and then
 480 you can satisfy your stomach by begging for bread in the town, where anyone who wants to will give you food.'

— TILL NIGHTFALL

'Eumaeus,' answered the much-enduring Odysseus, 'I should be glad to give Icarius' daughter, the wise Penelope, the whole truth. For I am well informed about Odysseus, whose misfortunes I have shared. But
 485 I am **frightened of this crowd of hot-tempered Suitors**, whose insolence and violent acts reach as high as the iron heavens. Just now when that fellow struck me a painful blow as I was walking harmlessly through the house, neither Telemachus nor anyone else lifted a finger to save me. So ask Penelope to wait in the hall and
 490 restrain her impatience till sunset, when she can question me about her husband's homecoming. Then let her give me a seat nearer the fire, for my clothes are mere rags, as you know, since it was you whom I first asked for help.'

When he heard what the other had to say, the swineherd went back.
 495 As soon as he crossed the threshold of her room Penelope exclaimed: 'Eumaeus! you haven't brought him? What does the wanderer mean by this? Is he afraid of someone in particular, or is there some other

LINE 466

Telemachus gave a loud sneeze A sneeze at the right moment counted as a lucky omen – the gods' seal of approval on what was just said. Telemachus sneezes as Penelope wishes the suitors dead, and she laughs, taking it as a good sign.

LINE 485

frightened of this crowd of hot-tempered Suitors Cautiously, Odysseus asks Penelope to wait until nightfall to talk. He won't risk the suitors' violence in the crowded hall by day.

reason why he lingers timidly? A timid beggar is a bad beggar.'

500 'He talks good sense,' Eumaeus replied. 'Anyone who wanted to avoid being attacked by those insolent men would feel the same. He asks you to wait till sundown. That time would suit you better too, my Queen, as it will allow you to converse with the stranger in private.'

505 'The stranger is no fool,' the thoughtful Penelope answered, 'however matters turn out. In the whole world I don't believe there's another set of brutal and evil schemers like these.'

His message delivered, the worthy swineherd left her and rejoined the assembled Suitors where he at once sought out Telemachus and, holding his head close, whispered winged words in his ear so that the others could not hear him: 'Dear master, I am leaving presently to
510 look after the pigs and farm, your livelihood and mine. It's for you to see to everything here. Look to your own safety first and take care that you don't come to harm. For plenty of these Achaeans harbour evil thoughts. May Zeus destroy them before they destroy us!'

515 'Very well, old friend,' said the prudent Telemachus. 'Go when you've had your supper, and in the morning come back with some good beasts for slaughter. I will see to everything here, I and the immortal gods.'

520 The swineherd sat down again on the polished settle and when he had satisfied his appetite and thirst went back to his pigs, leaving the courts and hall full of banqueters who, as the evening drew on, turned to the pleasures of singing and dancing.

